History of The River Stort Navigation

Originally called the Stour, the River Stort began to be called by its modern name in the 16th Century. The desire to make the river properly navigable came from the difficulty of moving the finished product of malting, an important industry in Bishop Stortford, along poorly managed roads to the breweries in London.

The idea of making the Stort more navigable appeared to offer an attractive, quicker and lucrative alternative and attracted a number of supporters. One of the prime movers was Thomas Adderley, the landlord of the Crown at Hockerill, just over the river from Bishop's Stortford. On 23 March 1759 an Act of Parliament was passed to make the river navigable from Bishop's Stortford to the River Lea at Hoddesdon, however the scheme failed due to lack of finance.

However, all was not lost. George Jackson became the next main proponent of the act. Jackson was Secretary to the Navy Board in 1758 and later Judge Advocate of the Fleet. His friend, Captain Cook, named Port Jackson in Australia and Point Jackson in New Zealand after him. Jackson and two other gentlemen, Charles Dingley and William Masterman, were the Commissioners for a new Act which received Royal Assent on 30 April 1766.

On 24 September 1766, work started under the direction of the engineer Thomas Yeoman. The contractors, William Glyn and his son and their gangs of navvies, took three years to canalise the river from the Causeway in Bishop's Stortford to the junction with the Lee Navigation at Feildes Weir near Hoddesdon. The cost was £100,000.

The Stort Navigation opened on 24 October 1769 with the arrival of three loaded barges, two with passengers and one with 15 chaldrons of coal, at Bishop's Stortford. The main traffic was malted barley downstream and timber, coal and grain as return loads. There are no early records of the tolls, but in 1791 there is report of '18-19,000 sacks of flour and 97,000 quarters of malt carried' - the equivalent of 7,275 tons or 180 barge-loads of 40 tons. There is a further record in 1811 of 40,000 tons carried including 203,000 of malt. However, in

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1812 Sir George said that the first 20 years had 'not been an advantageous concern.' In 1838, the first year that a financial return is recorded, £5,477 was taken as tolls. This was probably a maximum because in 1842 the railway to Bishop's Stortford opened and the tolls show an almost immediate halving. In 1848 tolls were £2,593. There are differing reports of the success of the Navigation but the probability was that it broke even until 1842 and from then on began to lose money.

In 1795, George Jackson issued the Stort Halfpenny token. This was issued, along with many others, due to the national shortage of small denomination coinage. The tokens were redeemable at Bishop's Stortford at the Company Offices at Swan Dock. In 1797, to secure an inheritance from his wife's uncle, George Jackson changed his name to George Duckett.

Meanwhile, there were a series of failed attempts to extend the Stort Navigation to Cambridge and beyond. Since 1779, when the Thames and Canals Committee in London instructed Robert Whitworth to survey a route, there had been five attempts to join the Stort to the Great Ouse. The early proposals were opposed by Lord Howard de Walden because the route passed through his estate at Audley End and The Duke of Bridgewater was heavily involved in a proposal in 1801 however, he died in 1803 and the plan was not taken any further.

The last two attempts took place in 1811 and 1812 and involved Sir George Duckett and the Earl of Hardwicke. The first of these failed but the second succeeded as the London and Cambridge Canal Act, receiving Assent on 9 June 1812. However, lack of finance meant the Act failed. The estimated cost was £570,000.

On the death of Sir George Duckett on 15 December 1822, his banker son, also called Sir George Duckett succeeded him as the owner of the Stort Navigation and, within two years, had mortgaged the Stort Navigation for £45,000.

On 17 May 1824, Sir George obtained an Act to build the Hertford Union Canal, between the Regent's Canal and the Lee Navigation in Hackney. The link was to make the connection between the two waterways easier by avoiding the semi-tidal part of the Lee between

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Limehouse and Old Ford. The 1¼-mile long canal, also known as Duckett's Cut, was completed by 1830 but it was never a success because of high tolls levied and so it was closed again in 1848. Later it was sold to the Regent's Canal in 1857 and reopened.

On 22 March 1832, Sir George Duckett was declared bankrupt. The Stort Navigation, valued at £150,000 with an annual income of £5,000 was put up for auction along with the Hertford Union. The sale took place in London on 11 June 1833 but there were no takers. At a meeting of the creditors in November 1833 it was decided to sell both waterways for £63,000 but again there were no takers.

The Stort Navigation remained in the hands of the Official Receiver, Moses Asher Goldsmaid, for the next 21 years. During this time little constructive maintenance took place and the condition of the waterway gradually deteriorated.

A protracted legal battle began between Sir George and creditor Richard Gurney for the recovery of his £40,000. Duckett appears to have fought a lengthy rearguard action lasting 14 years, during which time they only paid the absolute minimum. Gurney finally lost patience in 1848 and filed a Bill of Complaint with the Lord Chancellor and after many more hearings and failures to pay, Gurney finally foreclosed on 2 November 1853 and reluctantly took over the Navigation. Richard Hanbury Gurney died on 1 January 1854, and the whole process devolved on his executors (the family firm, Gurney & Co) who became the unwilling owners of a failing Navigation on 16 September 1854.

In 1857, an unsuccessful approach was made to the River Lee Trustees, offering them the opportunity to take over the responsibility of the Stort. A further attempt was made in 1868, after the Lee Conservancy Board had succeeded the Lee Trustees. The Board established purchase powers under an Act which imposed a time limit. The powers were not exercised in time due to the poor condition of the river.

Gurney & Co finally disposed of the Navigation to Truman, Hanbury and Buxton on 13 October 1873 for £15,000. There may well have been Hanbury family pressure brought to bear in this sale. They were almost certainly unwilling purchasers, because the next year

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another unsuccessful attempt was made to persuade the Lee Conservancy to take over. The Conservancy did survey the Stort 10 years later but did not view it as a good business proposition.

Truman, Hanbury and Buxton wrote the Stort off their books on 27 June 1889 when they sold it to John Poole Davis, a former engineer of the Navigation, for £100. He owned it for just nine years and sold it to Sir Walter Gilbey for £500 on 22 July on 1898. Davis was the only owner who sold it for more than he paid for it.

In 1900 Sir Walter, a resident of Bishop's Stortford, began negotiations with the Lee Conservancy. The tolls in 1901 were £927, in 1904 they were £615. Gilbey formed the Stort Navigation Company in May 1905 and in July transferred ownership of the river to the Company for £5,000. That is 4993 £1 shares and £7 cash.

By 1907, the tolls had dropped to £319 and the next year the Lee Conservancy considered that it would take £10,800 to bring the Stort up to a condition to take 65-ton barges.

At 11pm on 20 April 1909, one side of the Brick Cistern Lock at Roydon collapsed, trapping all except one of the Stort barges above the blockage. The Lee conservancy helped in repairing the lock and the Navigation reopened on 4 November. Sir Walter Gilbey offered the Stort free of charge to the Conservancy and finally, on 8 September 1911, they paid a nominal five shillings for ownership.

In 1912, the Lee Conservancy commenced improvements which included replacing all the turf-sided locks and dredging throughout. With the interruption of the First World War the works continued until 4 July 1924. On that day the Rt Hon Harry Gosling, the Minister of Transport officially reopened the Stort Navigation.

The dredging alone cost £11,722. The total cost of the reconstruction was £54,186 16s 7d. The work was maintained by the Lee Conservancy up to 1948 and has been continued by British Waterways.